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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, structures such as a principal's advisory committee are being mandated by school boards and legislatures in order to facilitate community representation and involvement. Twelve suggestions are offered to help principals cope with and benefit from community participation. (Author/MLF)

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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND THE PRINCIPAL

The once safe, or at least comparatively safe, world of the Principal can now be classified along with the Kiwi, Bald Eagle, and Passenger Pigeon. It is an extinct species, or at least an endangered one. No longer can the successful coach dream of "retiring" to the sanctity of the main office, safe in the knowledge that he need only say "jump" to hear a euphonious chorus of "how high" from his (or her) faculty, students, and community. The poor creature is besieged by students demanding "relevance," whatever that is, magistrates declaring that students are people, faculty asking for involvement in the decision-making, associations and unions bargaining, individually and collectively, and parents wondering, sometimes vociferously, why schools aren't what they remember them to be. He must satisfy so many publics, maintain so many delicate balances, and listen to so many different drummers, it's little wonder he (or she) looks askance at this thing called community involvement, and its precocious offspring, the Principal's Advisory Committee. And yet, no matter how long we bury our heads in the sand, they're not going to go away. Increasingly, such structures are being mandated by school boards and/or legislatures. Like the proverbial woman (or man), since we can't live without them, we'll have to learn to live with them. What follows might be a kind of basic survival kit for not only

coping, but making the most of what some feel is a sticky situation. Who knows, you might even grow fond of an Advisory Committee.

First, develop an attitude of acceptance. Fear is the worst thing you can feel; tolerance isn't much better. Like any other group of people, they can "sense" your discomfort, or lack of commitment to the intent of their being in existence. You can yawn them into oblivion or have them rubber stamp that which you have already decided, but that posture reflects little more than fear. Accept them and their potential as a constructive force not only for your school, but as an additional weapon to help you battle for what you feel your school needs.

Second, give them firm definitions of what their role is (advisory), and what kinds of tasks are their domain. They might develop some long range recommendations for curricular needs, or provide input into budget priorities, or assist in establishing learning stations in the community, or participate in evaluating a particular program or service in the school, such as the marking system, or the guidance program. You can use them as a sounding board for new proposals, such as an in-school alternative, or flexible scheduling, or the incorporation of a year-round operation. You're not turning the school over to them; you're asking

their opinions. You are still the decision-maker.

Third, like anyone, they need the smell of success. It is likely that they will make some good recommendations you can implement. If you can, do it, and give them credit. Tell the whole world that the idea came from them. Knowing they are listened to and have a batting average above .000 has amazing positive consequences for making them work for you.

Fourth, have a broad base of representation from students, faculty, parents and community. Draw members from the major publics you service and have each public choose its own. Have the student council choose student representatives. Three from each is a nice round number. I would further suggest that you not be chairperson. Their recommendations are less likely to be viewed as a put up job.

Fifth, meet regularly. A nice idea is to have luncheon meetings in the school. It's a time you can probably get them there. Since they're serving gratis, your providing a lunch a month is a very small, but a nice touch.

Sixth, keep the communications flow going. Send reminders of meetings, distribute minutes, and, if you have a newsletter, have a portion devoted to the deliberations and accomplishments of the Advisory Committee. Above all, listen to them. No one says you have to agree, but listen.

When you disagree, do so rationally. Don't lie, or take refuge in "that's not how we do it." They don't have a corner on the wisdom market. Come to think of it, neither do we.

Seventh, be willing once in a while to back an idea they feel strongly about, even if you're luke warm about the idea. Your being willing to take a risk for them will make them more understanding when you must really say "no way." You can then enlist their aid in making their idea work. If you do take this risk, do it enthusiastically, but with your eyes open. Point out potential or real pitfalls, and then work to overcome them. This will also help you make judicious use of your veto.

Eighth, don't make them candy salesmen, or magazine hawkers, or carnival sidemen. Most of the reaction I hear against most community organizations like PTA is that they're little more than fund-raisers. If you need that, go to them, but don't make that their only purpose.

Ninth, recognize that they're functioning in new roles too. Find some way to provide some training for them. Let them get an intensive short course that touches on group process, decision-making, school organization, the program of studies, and prevalent state law and board policies. Like you, they shouldn't be asked to operate out of ignorance. This is one

case where ignorance is not bliss.

Tenth, exert your leadership to keep the actions of the committee focused on substantive matters of policy and procedures. This is not a forum for the discussion of personalities or personnel matters. You must avoid having a teacher or student or administrator problem discussed here. Those kinds of concerns are best handled in private conferences, where constructive measures are more likely to be implemented. A public airing of an individual's dirty linen is most often counterproductive and tends to reduce the committee's image to gossip mongering.

Eleventh, make the meetings open to your publics. Letting the general populace know their presence is welcomed will go a long way towards negating any aura of clandestine decision making and will show that the committee is not the principal's puppet. The committee can set ground rules for audience participation, even if it did nothing more than set aside a time for public input. This "town meeting" flavor is one to be cultivated.

Twelfth, and finally, be aware and heed the axiom "none of us is as smart as all of us." If they contribute one significant idea, or support one substantial program, or quell one potential uprising, or reveal one fatal weakness, you will be ahead of the game. It only takes one and you're a winner.

There it is; a simple dozen. Community participation is very much a reality. The major reason it won't work is your reluctance and/or their apathy. Neither is a worthy attitude. There's a commercial which ends by the actor saying "you can pay me now, or pay me later." You can make them work for you now, or be mandated to do it later. Either way, the choice is yours.